

Tips and Tools for Occupational Therapy- AAT Activities



The role of an occupational therapist (OT) is to help people learn or re-learn everyday activities that are important to them. Children with physical disabilities are assisted by an OT, as well as adults who have undergone changes or a decline in their physical or cognitive well-being. These activities of daily living (ADLs) include tasks such as dressing, bathing, grooming, meal preparation, and shopping. Incorporating a therapy dog into an appropriate OT therapy activity can make learning fun and beneficial.

In Ontario, occupational therapists are governed by the College of Occupational Therapists of Ontario and must follow the regulations of the college with respect to assessment and treatment.

Why work with an animal?

Children and adults who enjoy the company of animals will benefit from the warm, fuzzy feelings that come with incorporating a dog into a treatment session. Suddenly, everyday, mundane and routine tasks become fun. A dog provides unconditional acceptance, affection and companionship. Studies have shown that the effect is physical; a person's blood pressure is reduced when provided with the opportunity to pat or cuddle a pet.

Selecting Measurable Goals

Incorporate the same treatment goals into an AAT session as in traditional therapy using a "canine twist". For example, if an OT goal is for the patient to write a shopping list, then think about making a list of shopping items from a local pet store. If the goal is to improve fine motor recovery in the hand and arm, then tasks such as patting or brushing the dog, or reaching to touch or support the weight of a small dog could be incorporated into the session. Throwing balls for the animal to retrieve could also be a beneficial task.

How to Get Started

Whether you choose to work independently or work collaboratively in treatment, it will be important to get your patient's permission first. In any institutionalized setting, pets should be evaluated through a recognized and reputable therapy dog organization. If you are an OT working in a patient's home and wanting to work with a family pet, check first to ensure your insurance covers this kind of work. Safety must come first for both the patient and the animal. Plan sessions carefully to ensure neither the patient nor the pet are at risk for stress or potential injuries.

Treatment Materials

Occupational therapists are ingenious at coming up with creative ways to adapt everyday tools and tasks. A dog's leash could be adapted to permit a safer way for patient to walk a dog. A dog's coat could be crafted with buttons, snaps, zippers and fasteners that a patient could practise using in therapy. Balls of different sizes, shapes and textures could be incorporated into a session. Lists, maps, bus routes and craft activities can easily be adapted with materials using a canine theme.

Reinforcement

Meeting a goal successfully can be reinforced by pausing a few minutes to pat the dog, having some fun by throwing a ball, or giving the animal a small treat. AAT is interactive, so patient success guarantees the therapy dog will enjoy the session as well. Ask the dog's handler to suggest activities and training commands that the dog enjoys to incorporate into your sessions.

Discharge

Progress in AAT can be incorporated into a routine OT discharge report as there should always be measurable goals and outcomes. Ask the patient for feedback about the sessions too. Allow the patient to say "goodbye" to the dog and be sure to thank any volunteer therapy dog team for its contribution.

Resources and Further Information

Fine, Aubrey. Handbook on Animal Assisted Therapy: Theoretical Foundations and Guidelines for Practice. Elsevier Press. 2010.

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OTD Toolbox Infosheet #14

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Good dogs doing great work!

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